

Chapters six and seven focus on a disciple of Christ named Stephen. He was among the seven, who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, chosen to minister to the needs of the Grecian widows. Stephen's ministry closely followed the ministries of Jesus, and the Apostles. Through the Holy Spirit, he performed miraculous signs and led many to Christ. Within the ranks of the Jews, there arose great opposition to Stephen. The Grecian Jews in the city tried to argue with Stephen, but they were no match for his wisdom, insight, or the power of the Holy Spirit. In similar fashion to the opposition Jesus' faced, Stephen's opponents stirred up the people, and persuaded ungodly characters to bring false charges against him.

Eventually Stephen had to face the Sanhedrin Counsel, as he was placed on trial for blasphemy. He made his defense by recounting much of Israel's history of rejecting God and His will. To solidify the conviction of his words, he told the religious leaders that they were no different than their godless ancestors, and that they were guilty of killing Jesus, their Messiah.

The religious leaders were so enraged that they demanded that Stephen be dragged to the edge of town and stoned to death. Saul, who we know as Paul, was there, giving his approval, and receiving the accolades of the men who murdered Stephen. In our flesh we cry out, "It is so unfair." Why should such a godly man have to die at the hands of the godless? We might also wonder why God would allow such a thing to happen.

In tonight's account, we read about the immediate results of Stephen's murder, and learn principles about suffering for our faith, as it relates to the overarching plan of God for the ages. Please read with me, Acts 8:1-4.

When we read in verse one that Paul approved of Stephen's execution, the verb is active. The Greek wording suggests Paul's active participation. He probably was not picking stones up to murder Stephen, but he was giving his approval, and urging the mob to go ahead and kill him.

We know from other passages that Paul was a rising star among the leaders of the Pharisees. He was advancing more rapidly than other men of his own age. The people recognized him as being a person of notoriety. If they had any hesitation in their hearts, Paul's approval gave them the confidence they needed to carry out this godless assassination.

I have been in ministry long enough to see this same spirit at work in the church today. When there is discord within the body, there are godly ways of handling it. If you have something against your brother, prayerfully, privately, and in the love of Christ, you are to go to him and share your concern so that you may restore him, or work out the differences that are between you. If that doesn't work, you are to take two or three witnesses. If you still cannot resolve the problem, take the situation to the whole church.

But sometimes there are people in the church who desire to be leaders, or are perceived by others to be leaders, who bypass the biblical model, and instead stir up dissension that can result in a divided church. They are not looking for restoration, or resolution, instead they set a trap to ambush the person with whom they are upset.

I have suffered these kinds of attacks when I was blind sighted over some accusation or attempt to undermine the authority that comes with ministry. I have seen this happen to Brother Carl, and to many other Pastors, and ministry leaders, in other churches. Some individual, or some small group of people, always drives this kind of opposition and division. A larger group feeds on the seeds of opposition, planted by the perceived leader, to choke out the person who is the focus of their attack. They are encouraged in their opposition, and the next thing you know a pastor is run off, or the church is divided, and Satan gains a victory.

By every account, Stephen was a godly man doing the will of God, ministering to the needs of the people, and sharing the love of Christ. At this point in his life, Paul was a tool of the devil to stop the spread of the gospel, and to kill a man of God.

When the seeds of discontent bear fruit, godlessness spreads like weeds. It gets out of hand, like a wildfire, and may seem impossible to stop. The damage done spreads, and produces lasting devastation. Up until this point, the church had experienced a relative peace. The Apostles had to stand against some opposition from the religious leaders, but the body of Christ was in a season of enjoying the fruits of the Spirit, being full of joy and at peace in their newfound faith in Jesus Christ.

After Stephen's death, however, on that very day, a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and the believers were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The Apostles did not leave Jerusalem, but the greater body of believers fled for their lives. The Grecian Jews who were Christians, and had stayed in Jerusalem, would have returned to their hometowns, but many of the Christians who lived in, and around, Jerusalem had to flee with their families to escape persecution, and imprisonment.

We have never experienced anything like this here in the Bible belt, but there are other people in the world who have to flee for their lives, because of their faith in Jesus Christ. We read much about the refugees fleeing Syria, and other war-torn areas of the Middle East. There is a great debate in our country, as there is in other countries of the world, about whether or not we should accept these refugees on our own soil.

This is a very complicated issue, for in my heart I want to help my brothers and sisters in Christ, but my common sense tells me that most of the refugees from the Middle East are Muslims, and opening our borders further would increase the probability of attacks here at home. Receiving, and supporting these refugees, would likely further undermine our values and our preferred way of life. If we could somehow vet those coming to the United States, so that we could be confident of their loyalty, appreciation, and productivity, that would be one thing, but congress has shown us that they cannot even vet the President of the United States, much less millions of refugees. We can certainly support our brothers and sisters in Christ with our prayers, and perhaps the Lord will open the doors of opportunity for us to send support, but we must not allow our emotions to cloud our judgment, or to eclipse our discernment. We cannot be naive about the ways of the world, or the schemes of Satan. If we remain prayerful, and sensitive to the Holy Spirit, God will reveal to us His will, and our role in His plan.

When we read of the widespread persecution of the early church, we naturally ask, "Why would God allow this to happen?" In our flesh we ask the same thing whenever we have to face persecution because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Why do bad things happen to good people? How could a loving God allow evil, and hardship, in the world? Doesn't God care about me, and my circumstances?

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world." Many of the difficult circumstances of life come as a result of sin and disobedience to the will of God. But, even if we could live perfect, sinless lives, we still live in a sinful, fallen world. We are not promised perfect lives, and circumstances, but we serve a perfect Lord and Savior. By faith we face each challenge of life, trusting in the Lord, and His plan for the future. Mature Christians understand that they have a part in God's plan, and sometimes, His plan may include our suffering.

Stephen certainly suffered because of his faith, and his stand, but the Lord was with him, and saw him through his trial. God used Stephen as an example, and as a source of

encouragement for the church throughout the ages. When his work was done, the Lord received Stephen into heaven where he received his eternal reward.

Just as God used the circumstances of Stephen's death, God had a plan and a purpose in allowing the persecution against the church. It is not as if God brought about the evil that resulted in Christians having to flee with their families, but He took what was meant for evil, and turned it to good, in the fulfillment of His purpose.

While the bible does not record all the details of the individuals who fled, we know from biblical principles that in their darkest hours, the Lord was still with His children. They did not escape persecution, but they did not have to face it alone, and God continued to use them, even as they fled.

Notice that they spread throughout the regions of Judea, and Samaria. Remember that Jesus told His disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the outer most parts of the earth." This was God's plan all along. The book of Acts is a record of how God's plan for spreading the gospel came to be. Verse four tells us that those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Jerusalem is in the province of Judea, and Samaria is the province just to the north of Judea. As the people fled, they went just as far as necessary to feel safe. To put it in perspective, this initial spread of the gospel was in about a forty-mile radius. Wherever they went, they shared the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that people had the opportunity to be saved. From here, the book of Acts records the spread of the gospel throughout the known world, but what is most significant here is that the gospel went out to the Samaritans.

Remember that while they shared a common ancestry, the Samaritans were no longer regarded as Jews. In fact the Jews hated the Samaritans. But, the Jews who fled from Jerusalem had a changed heart. The love of Christ in them overcame any prejudice they might have otherwise had, and they readily shared the gospel with the people they met along the way.

This is an important element of our faith. Jesus died for all, and there is no room for prejudice within the body of Christ. Brother Jimmy shared with me that a woman called the church this past Sunday to ask if Afro-Americans were welcome in our church. It blows my mind that she even thought that she would have to ask, but obviously, because of her life experience, she thought that she had to ask before coming to church. Without regard to race, creed, or color, anyone who is seeking the Lord, and the truth of God's word, is welcome here, and shame on anyone in our church family who would not welcome someone into our fellowship because of race.

Verse two tells us that devout men buried and mourned over Stephen. These were probably relatives or godly Jewish associates of Stephen's who knew him and respected him. They too must have had fear in their hearts as utter chaos broke out in Jerusalem. The scene reminds me of the reports we see of riots in major cities of the United States. Instigators stir up the crowds over something that has happened, and the next thing you know there is anarchy in the streets. Everyone is emboldened to violence, and lawlessness. This is what was taking place in the streets of Jerusalem, and all of the anger, and hatred, was focused on those who professed faith in Jesus Christ, with Saul, or Paul as we come to know him, as the chief instigator.

The bible says that he ravaged the church, drug people out of their houses, and threw them into prison. As a Pharisee, committed to the law, he became a man of lawlessness, with his zeal focused on the destruction of Christians, and the church.

About half of the book of Acts focuses on Paul and his ministry. Here Luke shows us the man Saul was before his conversion, to set up the contrast of who Paul would become, when he

came under the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Saul became a different person. Paul was born again. The greatest persecutor of the church became the most well known evangelist in the world, and the author of half of the New Testament Scriptures. This same principle is at work in the lives of every person who comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ today. In our sin we are enemies of God and opponents of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but by God's grace, He changes us from the inside out. We become a new creation. We develop a new worldview. We have new meaning and purpose, and under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we join God in what He is doing in the world. Even if our entails opposition or suffering, what does it matter? We willingly forsake all, in order to gain Christ, and to live in His grace.